

# Design is humanism

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In this article we want to explain concisely the great challenges that all teachers of Humanities and Social Sciences face. Bearing in mind that our work is carried out in a Design School the main points that have to be tackled are the following: a) *the importance of humanities and social sciences in the creation of a values structure*; b) *the use of logos*; c) *education related to human emotions*; d) *the classical memory*; e) *self-awareness*; f) *awakening the intellectual 'Eros' in us*; g) *criticism and metacritique*; h) *the function of 'dialogues'*; i) *reflection on 'meta-odos'*; j) *words in the world*; l) *a deeper insight into social, religious and political imagery*; m) *the construction of 'Civitas'*; n) *revealing the concepts "inter" and "trans"*; o) *interpreting cultural references*; p) *liberating the individual from techno-dependency*; q) *living with dignity in the world*.

Many years have passed since Jean-Paul Sartre presented his conference entitled *Existentialism is Humanism* to the French society of the time. Through this public event, which had a great impact, this twentieth century philosopher presented a synthesis of his existentialist thinking, including some of the main points of his philosophical proposition. We took inspiration from the title of the conference – subsequently published as a book – for the title and framework for our own words.

It is evident that we are destined to live in a time of global crisis, in an era where disorientation, perplexity and fragmentation all too often prevent us from seeing

what is important and what is not. Faced with this often chaotic, difficult and desperate situation, our attitude as educators becomes paramount and pressing, as long as it can be constructive and reasoned, and as long as it is based on the cultivation of all that prepares, enriches, and protects the human condition. For that reason, in this article we would like to present some of the arguments which lead us to believe and maintain that our students need to know about and relate to the world of Humanities and the Social Sciences.

Asking ourselves what is the sense of Humanities and Social Sciences in a school like ours, is like asking what

is the 'telos' or final aim of an educational environment dedicated to producing professional designers of the future. We believe that it is important and urgent to think around the goals which humanistic and social subjects can have within programmes such as ours. We should not forget that a school as important as to the history of design as the Bauhaus considered the principal aim of teaching to be, not just the training of future artists and designers, but also the formation of human beings. So, for example, Walter Gropius wanted the artist to be a person primarily, and, in the words of Moholy-Nagy, "Man is the objective, not the object".

It is simply a question of continuing down that path. And in fact we also believe that every school, including our own, should have as its principal mission the formation of people, a decisive contribution to the development of its students as committed citizens, who are involved both socially and culturally. Teaching design is teaching to live and to be whole people, to cultivate what is, in fact, the human side that we all have within.

That is why we believe in the transcendence of humanistic and social studies, i.e. those related to the formation of people as individuals who live in a human, social and cultural world: literature, history, art, philosophy among other disciplines that we could mention. The primordial aim of Humanities and Social Sciences lies in understanding people and their situations - an exploration of all possible dimensions, both visible and invisible. From that point of view, any discipline aiming to consider the humanity of man, or what it means to be a human being, can be placed in the field of Humanities and Social Sciences.

We are dealing with what should be essential to the education of our pupils. The question surrounding the sense of Humanities and Social Sciences is especially pertinent in a University setting, since the University as an institution has traditionally been the repository for informa-

tion and research in Humanities and Social Sciences, although not the only one. Now, we need to investigate what the 'telos' of Humanities and Social Sciences might be in our School, while bearing in mind the structural changes which affect our most immediate context, both in the area of communication and in the political, social and cultural fields. Even though educational institutions have undergone many changes since their creation, we are of the view that we must now give urgent consideration to the aims that the culture of Humanities and Social Sciences might have in a world like ours, within Elisava School.

For all that has been said up to now, the reader may realise that our reflection is centred on the ends and not the form or the subject. We are aware that in order to take Humanities and Social Sciences adequately into the heart of our educational institution we need to take the teaching methods and content fully into account. The means should lead us to the end, but if from the end we do not give sufficient consideration to the means, then the will to learn may easily become frustrated. We are aware of this, but we do not wish here to enter into a formal analysis of Humanities and Social Sciences teaching, but rather a final analysis. Our aim is to formulate the following question: What use are Humanities and Social Sciences in a Design School? For the moment we shall leave to one side a couple of other very relevant questions: How should these disciplines be taught? And, what teaching resources are necessary to capture the interest of the pupils and seduce them?

We shall therefore see a systematic presentation of some of the ends associated with the areas of Humanities and Social Sciences:

### The Importance of Humanities and Social Sciences in the Creation of a Structure of Values

In a context like ours where hyper-specialisation has fallen into disrepute for a number of reasons, we need to discover the architectural value of Humanities in relation to knowledge, and also how they can be of service to our students in their task of intellectual organisation. In our opinion, Humanities have the function of structuring and building knowledge. Humanistic ideas act as the central axes from which we can form any kind of understanding of the world and of mankind.

We believe that Humanities and Social Sciences have and will continue to have an essential role in the conceptual and cognitive structuring of our students, to the point where they might well deserve to be qualified as a cosmic instrument of reality and discourse. Given the immense amount of information and data which we receive every day, we need to establish guidelines and criteria which will enable us to organise, relate and place all this information in context accordingly. This is the only way to transform information into knowledge. As Montaigne would say, better a well-made head than a well-filled one.

### The Use of logos

Man has been defined as the animal repository of *logos*. However, *logos* does not just mean rationality, but also words. Humanities promote the use of *logos*, both in the spoken (oratorical) and written word (literature) and in terms of rationality, whether in its pure (metaphysics and philology) or practical usage (ethics and morals), as Kant would have it. In this sense we should be aware that in Catalan the word *enraonar* (to reason) means just that, to put into operation our rational capacity, to understand and communicate reality through concepts and ideas.

On the other hand, the aim of Humanities and Social Sciences is to provide a critical cosmovision of reality.

If design is about thinking and planning, if it is knowing how to relate and connect our ideas and creations with concrete aims and ends, then from Humanities and Social Sciences we shall have to help make the rational and reflective capacity of our designers stronger and more solid. From these areas of knowledge we try to teach ideas in order that students might broaden and enrich their vision of the world, as we believe that the scope and potential of their vital conception is fundamental.

Of course, this defence of *logos* should not be interpreted in a unilateral, rationalist sense. Within the design process the emotions, moods and feelings of the creator also play an important role, and it cannot be overstated that an essential part of planning projects or designing objects is the gathering of thoughts, the calculation of possibilities, working through ideas and a reasoned discernment for what needs to be done at every stage. In art as well as design, the *logos* has a structuring role and for that reason it is essential that there disciplines geared towards promoting its development, not just individually, but in communities, through the practice of *dialogos* or dialogue.

### Education Related to Human Emotions

Man is not simply a logical animal, but also one whose nature is affected by feelings (described by X. Zubiri as *naturaleza sentiente*). Reflections on human emotional experiences is the domain of Humanities, and not just that, but also the education of human feelings, emotions, passions and their verbal and gestural articulation; their aesthetic and graphic forms.

We should always remember Blaise Pascal's *dictum*: "Le coeur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point; on le sait en mille choses" (The heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of. We see this in a million things"). Thinkers, artists and writers have to teach us through their creations to see and experience the world

in another way, and through their work we have to be capable of transforming our emotional perception of the way things are. As Shopenhauer said, the artist lends us his eyes so that we might see the world.

If we agree that the education of emotions is one of the centres around which life is organised, one of its deepest, most solid strata, then as teachers we should be looking to and focussing on this decisive dimension of human life. Here, as in many other aspects of human life, complement and balance should be our fundamental principles.

### **The Classical Memory**

Understanding our cultural roots is a pressing concern in the fast-moving and *presentist* technological society in which we live. The dangers of poor memory and forgetting our origins are a real threat in our cultural universe. The fight against amnesia and ephemeral hegemony, and the promotion of our capacity to re-member and re-memorise has to be one of our greatest educational goals. Humanities encourage the practice of classical memory, the collection of mythological, religious and symbolic resources from western culture, exploration around the origins of thought. Asking ourselves about Ulysses, Oedipus or Abraham is much more than a game, or simple curiosity. It is the same as asking about what constitutes our Judeo-Christian civilisation, about those elements without which our identity is left faded and blurred.

Understanding characters like Jesus of Nazareth or Nietzsche is not a pure and sterile exercise in erudition, but a way of learning to read and interpret reality and history. It is the best way of understanding our roots, of seeing and appreciating that in the past we find the seeds of the present. In this field, experience and encouragement of personal, solitary reading is supreme in that it allows us to make the journey to the origins of history and also to the origins of ourselves. The reading experi-

ence should be understood as an insertion of Sense, as an exploration of the horizon that we should continually be aiming for throughout our lives.

### **Self-awareness**

Socrates, after the Delphic oracle, considered that the fundamental responsibility of every human being was to know him- or herself, and then to learn to live. The tendency of Humanities is, in the end, towards self-awareness, i.e. a deeper understanding of the essential structure of human beings, but basically, of oneself. That means that all education will eventually and definitively be self-education, or the process through which we become humans, the path along which we become humanised and build ourselves as people.

Self-observation and self-knowledge are questions which involve not only material aspects, i.e. content, but also and especially formal aspects of methodology and teaching. The field of Humanities seeks an education where the discovery of the 'I' may be contemplated within the educational practice. Following Socratic advice, we believe that a life, if it is to really be one, requires examination and questioning, reflection and meditation. The mission of humanistic and social teaching is the not the transfer of pure knowledge, but is a culture which allows us to understand our own condition and helps us to live.

The awakening of our own identity is essential to the creative process. Creation, in its true sense, is the act of exteriorising the 'I'. Humanities and Social Sciences insofar as they stimulate this awakening, also enable the creativity of the creator. We are fully aware that the question of personal identity has been tossed aside in the teaching process and that it is essential to recover it in the very heart of our institutions if we are to produce free, independent people.

### Awakening the Intellectual 'Eros' in us

The object of Humanities and Social Science is not to achieve absolute and complete knowledge of each and every discipline which affects human beings, but to encourage the eroticism of knowing, that is, the desire to understand and to tirelessly dig deeper around the root of *Humanitas*. Kindling the intellectual flame is a question of form and also presupposes the desire of tutors themselves.

It is a matter, then, of procedure, but one which is particular to a humanistic and social education. It should awaken the desire and offer instruments and guidelines for it to be continuously fulfilled throughout one's life. The ideal of the omniscient sages (Leonardo, Leibniz o Goethe) is an ideal which, to a large extent, passes over the possibilities of modern-day man. Nowadays, the ideal needs to be directed towards a different horizon: the transmission of the intellectual *Eros* (passion) and the labour of learning. We believe that every student in this school should agree with the classic Latin phrase *nihil humani a me alienum puto* (I judge nothing human to be alien to me).

### Criticism and metacritique

The practice of criticism is fundamental in democratic, plural and participative societies. Humanities promote the spirit of criticism, that is, the elaboration of rational, argued criticism of the mechanisms of power, the different forms of homogenisation and institutions. The lessons of intellectual tutors provide a critique of content and make it possible to go beyond criticism, that is to establish the bases of metacritique, the positive, constructive spirit.

The field of Humanities and Social Science is a kind of *Kulturkritik*, the struggle against the ignorance and foolishness which are so prevalent in our society, the battle against the forces of dehumanisation and massification.

It is a call for the good and betterment of the illustrated project. As Kant said "Illustration is man's liberation from his own guilty inability (...) *Sapere aude!* Be brave enough to use your own reason! Hereby lies the motto of illustration."

For all of the above we must conclude that the fight for self-criticism and lucidity should be one of our major objectives as educators. The expectation is also that future designers will have a critical awareness and be able, by their creations, to demonstrate their considerations of today's society. We do not find it positive to place our students within static aesthetic or social canons, but, in keeping with the finest legacy of the twentieth century spirit of transgression and the avant-garde, to help them to broaden their horizons and to develop bold proposals which are full of creativity.

### The Function of Dialogues

In a multicultural, multi-social and multi-religious setting, the function of dialogue is mainly to achieve co-existence in all areas of life. The practice and theory of dialogue is deeply entrenched in the heart of Humanities and Social Sciences and, especially, in a philosophical tradition which emerged from the Athenian Agora (marketplace). The transmission of dialogue is not a simple question of content, but also one of process, and the transmission in itself demonstrates the humanistic and social influences of an educational institution.

Reasoning, the ability to listen, patience, cordiality, ability to debate and defend our positions, investigating the truth, are all *sine qua non* conditions in the practice of dialogue and in the endeavour to overcome and banish narcissism and egocentricity, sterile and impoverishing introversion. Future designers should be able to develop their own practice within a framework shared with other professionals and must learn to design joint projects, maintaining their own positions while knowing how

listen to the views of others. Educating for the practice of dialogue is therefore an essential task, not just from a personal point of view, but also from the perspective of the workplace.

### **Reflections on Meta-hodos**

A central concern in the history of thought is reflection on method (meta-hodos) or the path by which to achieve the ultimate depths of reality. Methodological concerns, whether in the field of science or education is the patrimony of Humanities and Social Sciences. This means that in an educational institution the transmission of a method of working, reading or interpreting reality is fundamental to enabling students to resolve new situations and conflicts in the future employing the tools they have received during their education.

Our subjects should be the beginning of the paths that each of our students will need to tread, each path representing their personal and professional development. Artistic and historical learning, anthropological knowledge and the aesthetic and ethical experience should translate into the ability to read reality adequately, and to launch ourselves into it equipped with all the ideas and values that we have learned in the classroom, and follow a path that will merge with our own existence.

### **Words in the World**

Man has been defined as being an animal blessed with words. The function of the word, concern for the use of the verb and its construction, is the patrimony of Humanities and Social Sciences. Teaching how to think is, in a way, like teaching the world to give its word, that is, to describe it in words, giving it logical consistence and

meaning and, to paraphrase Wittgenstein, to be aware that the limits of language define the limits of our world. Thanks to language, we can use words to describe reality. We can express it, evoke it or even insinuate it, in the words of George Steiner, "That which is found entirely outside language, is also found entirely outside life."<sup>1</sup>

As anthropologist Lluís Duch has said, one of the most urgent tasks of the present is to re-establish the *proper use of the word*, which is the same as rediscovering the dignity of the practice of being human. This process demands the use of the written and spoken word and, therefore, is a question which deals as much with procedure as with content.

### **A Deeper Insight into Social, Religious and Political Imagery**

Humanities and Social Sciences promote the ability to penetrate the structure of social, religious and political imagery, to get inside the fibre that our culture and civilisation is made up of. Students have to be able to interpret their worlds and to analyse the strings which move social, political and religious realities. Understanding the relationships which exist between design and ideology, contextualising design by introducing it into a given social, economic and political framework will be one of our principal tasks. From this starting point, it is easier to understand that we need to offer our students tools so that they can become involved in their own contexts in order to transform and modify them as necessary, in full knowledge of the factors which have brought them about. We are of the opinion that design is much more than a simple reflection of socio-economic reality. It is also a means of understanding and therefore has a mission to

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<sup>1</sup> G. STEINER. *Lenguaje y silencio. Ensayos sobre la literatura, el lenguaje y lo inhumano* (Language and Silence. Essays on Language, Literature and the Inhuman). Mexico. Gedisa, 1990. p. 55

act directly within our social reality in order to modify and adapt it to our aims. Only in this way can design form part of a liberating and humanising project. As Karl Marx said, "Philosophers have just interpreted the world in different ways; but the question is to transform it." During this transformation, designers cannot afford to remain on the sidelines.

### The Construction of Civitas

A central concern in teaching new subjects is the area of citizenship. Educating also means producing citizens, not just in the physical sense of the word, but in the ethical sense the expression, that is, preparing them to live civilised lives. This process is only possible through Humanities and Social Sciences, since the concepts of the *polis*, and later the *civitas* belong to and are characteristic of the humanistic tradition of western society.

Humanistic and social education should contribute to a person's self-development (learn and assume the human condition, learn to live) and teach them to be citizens. In all, the building of the *homo politicus* is not simply a material question, but also a formal one. We can only become citizens if we acquire the right to participate actively and intelligently in the democratic and civic life of our society, and if, as designers and as people we have something to say. Design is a civic challenge which should be confronted from the awareness of our professional and human responsibilities.

### Revealing the Concepts of Inter- and Trans-

In University-level education, it is necessary to reveal the value and sense of generalist and macrocosmic knowledge, which aims to place the subject in some social, cultural, political and religious reality, or as Max

Scheler would say, to make man aware of the place he occupies in the cosmos. In order to achieve this it is essential that we understand our roots, and from there face the challenges that may be presented to us by a society where difference and plurality are increasingly evident. All humanistic education should integrate, at its heart, the concepts of *inter* and *trans*. Humanities and Social Sciences promote the capacity for dialogue and intercultural communication in that they open up perspectives to new ways of thinking.

In our subject areas, we want to take on the challenge of complexity and multi-disciplinarity, of transversality and globalism. In the words of Morin, "The challenge of globalism is therefore at the same time a challenge of complexity. In fact, complexity occurs from the moment the different aspects which make up a whole (be they economic, political, sociological, psychological, emotional, mythological) are inseparable and are interdependently and inter-retroactively linked between their parts and their whole, their whole and their parts."<sup>2</sup>

By that we wish to assert that a thought which separates and isolates should be substituted for one which distinguishes and connects, which grasps reality through its inter-relationships and interconnections. We therefore state that we are completely against the sort of macro-specialisation which many sectors of our society invite us participate in and, remembering the words of Morin himself, "The kingdom of specialists is the kingdom of the emptiest general ideas, and the emptiest of all is that general ideas are not necessary."<sup>3</sup>

We should support a way of thinking based on the paradigm of complexity given that everything that has been

<sup>2</sup> E. MORIN. *Tenir el cap clar* (Have a Clear Head). La campana. p. 14.

woven together is complex (*complexus*). Our great aim is to analyse and explain in order to gain a better understanding. Our great challenge is to undertake a respectful and intelligent interpretation of the reality of the world, man and his creations, with the knowledge that trivial things do not exist, only trivial views on things. And we should never lose sight of the fact that reality is complex in itself.

### **Interpreting Cultural References**

Knowledge of cultural references, topics and myths is fundamental for situating oneself within the heart of a culture, and gaining a deeper understanding of its essence. Humanities empowers people to investigate, using their own tools, the cultural references of their own culture and other cultures. That is why we should trace the way in which we, the men and women who make up this western society, are made; some of the myths, symbols, forms and images which have been used to express the fears, wishes, desires, hopes and obsessions of western man.

Every era has its own particular concerns, every moment its own individual worries; each period of history is characterised by a spiritual personality shaped by motives, forms and expressions which have found in art and, more recently, in design, one of their best vehicles. Designers of the future should be able to interpret what happens in their world, but this can only be done well for the culture in which they are based, if they understand the thoughts pulsing through it.

Understanding creative man – artist or designer – within this historical, sociological and cultural framework is one of our greatest aims. So for example, it would be difficult

for us to understand the design proposals of Alfred Loos if we do not know about the *Geist* in Vienna at the turn of the century, or if we do not incorporate it fully into the heart of a particular socio-cultural situation. It would be difficult to understand the creation of photomontage by the German Dadaists without placing it a context which deals with questions such as communism, the crisis which followed the Great War or the Weimar Republic.

We set out from the thesis that art and design are just one of the diverse faces of that polyhedron known as culture, and that art and design are languages which express an era. Place art and design within the cultural net, understand it through its interaction with many other cultural and social factors – when all is said and done what it boils down to is seeing how ideas have sculpted and given form to the subject and that art and design should be considered in the light of the context which makes them possible.

### **Freeing the Individual from Techno-dependency.**

The hegemony of instrumental and technological reason in all walks of life is a evident fact at the beginning of this new century. Techno-dependency does not refer only to people's practical lives, but also to mental structure and organisation of intelligence. Redeeming humans from the unrepentant vassalage of technocratic reason is a challenge that may only be taken up from the knowledge and profound study of humans and their most relevant traits. As Hans Jonas said, "In the name of human autonomy, of the dignity which exists, of being in possession of ourselves and not allowing ourselves to be possessed by our own machinery, we have to keep the technological gallop under extra-technological control."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibidem. p. 126.



### Living with Dignity in the World

The fundamental task of human beings and very specifically that of designers, is to make the world a place for living in. In other words, it is the transformation of chaos into cosmos, the jungle into a home (*morada*). As Heidegger said, the task of living in the world is directly related to the that of building (*Bauen*) and thinking (*Denken*). The practice of Humanities and Social Sciences allows human beings to re-discover themselves and search for their place in a set of circumstances.

Living in the world is not just an exterior task, but fundamentally interior. There are dwellings, moreover, there are homes, where there is human space, and human space only exists through the practice of thought and dialogue, from the humanisation of circumstances. As Marx asserted, and all of the great designers have confirmed through their works, "If man is made by circumstances, then circumstances must be made humanly." It is also up to the designers whether man continues to be human.

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<sup>4</sup> H. JONAS. *Técnica, medicina y ética. La práctica del principio de responsabilidad*. (Technique, medicine and ethics. The principle of responsibility in practice). p. 39.